

El Paso Times



NEWS

Pipe Dreams: El Paso's plans for water importation from Dell City still 20-30 years away

Danielle Prokop El Paso Matters

Published 5:03 a.m. MT May 4, 2022 | Updated 8:12 a.m. MT May 4, 2022

This is a two-part series on future water importation from Dell City to El Paso.

DELL CITY, Texas — The weathered billboard leading into Dell City is sun-bleached to near illegibility. It depicts a lounging Angus cow, a ristra of chilies, a bunch of grapes and well-spewing water. Beneath the photos, cracked and rusted words spell out “The Valley of Hidden Waters.”

Simply put, it could say instead “El Paso’s Hidden Waters.”

Squeezed to find water for future growth, El Paso Water in 2016 ramped up purchases of large tracts of the land in Dell City, much of that ranches and farmland. The utility’s 70,400 acres of so-called “water ranches” access the sprawling Bone Spring-Victorio Peak aquifer that extends for 700 miles underneath southern New Mexico and West Texas. The utility has spent \$222 million on 20 properties in Dell City, which is about an hour’s drive east of El Paso.

It is from these ranches that El Paso plans to pipe in water sometime between the year 2040 or

2050. The utility hopes to pump 20,000 acre feet — more than 6.5 billion gallons of water every year from that area. For reference, 1 acre-foot is nearly 326,000 gallons.

However, there won't be any pumps and pipelines anytime soon, utility officials said, since the plan hinges on anticipated growth. In the meantime, El Paso Water is pouring money and seeding the foundation for eventually importing water.

John Balliew, the CEO of El Paso Water, said conservation and cheaper water supplies pushed back the importation project, which he said gives the utility time to pay down the outstanding \$168 million owed in low-interest state loans before the cost of water rises.

"The further we can defer, the better," Balliew said. "We want to pay all of the money we borrowed from the (state) back, before we have to build any infrastructure to move the water into town. That way, the customers are not paying for the water and the pipes and pumps at the same time."

The total cost of importation is an estimated \$889 million, according to the 2021 50-year Water Plan for the Far West Texas Water Planning Group. The costs are split into two phases over 20 years for land sales, drilling and additional wells, plus the installation of a desalination facility to treat the water in Dell City which is too salty— or brackish — to drink.

How solar is the Sun City?: El Paso trails southwest cities in solar power, ranks second in Texas

'Location, location, location'

Groundwater is the primary source supplying water for most of West Texas, according to David French who directs the groundwater team at the Texas Water Development Board. But it's not always simple.

"Water is like real estate, it's all about location, location, location," French quipped. "In many places, the water-rich areas are not where the people are."

In West Texas, most of the population is in El Paso. But most of the water is not.

Climate change has shriveled the Rio Grande in recent years and underground resources are still being pumped faster than they can refill to make up for shortfalls on the surface.

The good news is that El Paso's conservation efforts mean its main source of groundwater, the Hueco Bolson, has stabilized, but levels dropped hundreds of feet due to municipal pumping through the late 1980s.

Currently, El Paso is the only city in the region with robust alternative water sources. Those sources include a combination of fresh groundwater, "purple pipe" treated wastewater, Rio Grande water and desalinated brackish groundwater. The utility will develop a plant for recycled wastewater (also called toilet-to-tap), expected to add 20,000 acre-feet to the supply in the next few years.

But even that won't be enough to support more people, Balliew said. The fact that El Pasoans are using less water will also help, but it is not enough either. Demand for water per person in El Paso has plummeted from 205 gallons a day in 1985 to about 129 gallons a day currently.

Projections show El Paso growing by another 600,000 residents over the next 50 years to a population of more than 1.5 million people, according to the 50-year plan for the regional water planning group.

So El Paso Water is setting its sights about 80 miles east to Dell City. The Bone Spring-Victorio Peak aquifer underneath New Mexico and Texas is fed by monsoon flows from the Sacramento Mountains. It's one of the few West Texas aquifers that's consistently replenished by rainfall, allowing for agricultural production in the Dell City valley.

The unique geology of the limestone aquifer makes it hard to measure, said Al Blair, an Austin-based hydrologist who contracts with Hudspeth County's Underground Water Conservation District No. 1 (HCUWCD1).

"We don't know the true extent of the bottom of the aquifer," Blair said. "We know enough about it to know that there's this considerable amount of water there."

Estimates of recharge varied between 6,000 acre-feet per year to 240,000 acre-feet per year, across studies from 1957 to 2016. Researchers from the New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources said the most accurate model from 2016 estimates 6,000 to 12,000 acre-feet in recharge per year in a 2020 report.

The good, the bad and the ugly

For decades, there were concerns — now-debunked — that fresh groundwater would run out in El Paso between 2020 and 2025. Reports about aquifer levels dropping first appeared in the 1970s. Fears continued through the 1990s and early 2000s.

Enter the \$3 million dollar study, described by the Texas Observer in 2006 as a "widespread doomsday prognostication," paid for by El Paso developer Woody Hunt and Denver billionaire Phillip Anschutz. It urged the utility to invest in importation as a solution to depleted groundwater, and the unreliable river. Hunt also argued the city could dispose of brine from desalination on his land, which included salt flats.

The utility denied a public records request for the study — titled "Water Resource Development: The Challenge to a Region" — saying there were no responsive records.

Both men owned a combined 9,000-acres of land in Dell City.

Groundwater, unlike surface water, which is regulated by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, is considered private property. It can be bought and sold, and the owner has significant leeway to pump any amount on their land, except when regulated by a local district. El Paso Inc. reported in 2004, that Hunt and Anschutz asked other farmers to 'sell their fields en masse,'

totaling 22,000 acres.

The utility attempted to make several deals with Hunt in the early 2000s, said Ed Archuleta, the utility's former CEO. The deals failed due to a series of lawsuits and the 2008 recession, but also in part due to "backlash."

"There were a lot of people that were very concerned that El Paso was going to pump that water and leave them dry," Archuleta said.

Some landowners, many ranchers, were concerned they were being shut out of land deals by rules installed by the local groundwater management district. Under these rules, they argued in lawsuits, their properties were not considered for certain permits, which would allow them a guaranteed amount of water to pump, even in drought years. Instead, they were limited to permits that curtailed water allowed in a drought, which they argued made their property less valuable.

Residents of Dell City said that period was acrimonious, with people refusing to talk to one another and forming sides.

The fight over Dell City water eventually reached the Texas Supreme Court. The court sided with ranchers against the local groundwater district, writing in 2008: "The District's transfer rules, in essence, grant franchises to some landowners to export water, while denying that right to others."

In July 2016, El Paso Water shelled out \$50 million for the 26,470-acre CL Ranch, owned by three brothers in Dell City. Then, a few weeks later, El Paso Water was approved for an additional \$150 million in loans from the Texas Water Development board.

Water and money

Importing water costs \$3,000 an acre-foot — six times more than \$500 desalinating the same amount. That's 10 times more than treating and distributing Rio Grande water at \$300 an acre-foot and 20 times more expensive than \$150 it takes to pump an acre-foot of fresh groundwater.

Balliew said the crux of El Paso's water issues is funding, not water availability.

"We can take care of any water supply issue as long as we have the money to do it," he said. "The main challenge is having the income, the ratepayers having to afford what it will take to supply the water."

Increases in water costs add up fast on bills, said Alex Mayer, director of the Center for Environmental Resource Management at University of Texas, El Paso.

"We know that water costs are gonna go up by two, three, maybe four times what they are now," Mayer said. "It's important that we plan for that right now."

Mayer and colleague Josiah Heyman, an anthropology professor, submitted a paper examining the burden water bills have on El Pasoans of different income levels. They found people in low-income

households — bringing home annual salaries of \$10,000 to \$30,000 — could spend between 20% to 30% of their budgets on water costs.

"Drinking water is a tiny, tiny fraction of the volume we use every day. I'm not concerned that we're making people go thirsty," Mayer said. "But they're going to have to make choices about how much water they're using in the home, like laundry and bathing."

More: Irrigation districts plan for another dry year as drought mars Rio Grande

Balliew said the utility wants to foster urban and rural coexistence, saying the utility will "maintain a viable community."

"We're not going to dry anything up. People who want to live there will still be able to live there with the water to produce crops," Balliew said of Dell City, "The Valley of Hidden Waters."

El Paso Times writer Martha Pskowski contributed to this story. She may be reached at mpskowski@elpasotimes.com and @psskow on Twitter.